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Destruction and the philosophy of desire. In: Green Crimes and Dirty Money. Spapens, Toine,
White, Rob, van Uhm, Daan and Huisman, Wim, eds. Green Criminology . Routledge. ISBN
9780815372219. [Book Section]

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

This version is available at: <https://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/24619/>

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Destruction and the philosophy of desire

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Looking at green criminology from the perspective of neoliberal economics can add some elements to this growing area of enquiry. Complementing economic reasoning with references to what I describe as the philosophy of desire can compound arguments against environmental destruction. This chapter attempts both enterprises.

The abysmal science

We spend money we don't have, on things we don't need, to make impressions that don't last, on people who don't care. Because we do not pursue what is necessary, but what is superfluous, neoliberal economic thought needs to turn the superfluous into a natural product of human activity or even into an element of human organic reproduction. Hence its need to imitate the natural sciences. Biologists, physicists, mathematicians and other scientists have been called upon to make economic theories more 'realistic and effective', namely to inoculate doses of dogma into them. The major opus of economics produced in the 20th century, the *General Theory* of Keynes (1936), out of a total 400 pages included, mainly in the appendix, three or four simple equations. In 1950 only in 2-3 per cent of the articles published by the influential *American Economic Review* contained mathematic formulas, which normally were not at all sophisticated. In 1980 the papers with mathematical calculations were 44 per cent and formulas had become much more complex. Currently the percentage is close to 90 per cent. The only 'real' science within the human sciences, this increasingly esoteric discipline, in its neoliberal version, dominates in university courses, in the specialist literature, and in most schools of management and business. It is the core religion of business administrators, large enterprises, financial institutions, ministries of the economy, central banks, international organizations, the World Bank, the World Monetary Fund and the European Commission.

'The economy is seen as a physical system, implying flows of goods, information and energy, so that it might be useful to model the economy as a system, like physics does. However,

while economic theory uses the concept of equilibrium, the same concept used by physics cannot be applied to the economy, because this is an open system and equilibrium refers to closed systems' (Gallino, 2011: 92).

Neo-liberalism does not observe and describe the economic reality, it creates this reality (Ruggiero, 2013). It also contradicts one of the very axioms of free markets, namely that the full costs of a transaction must be borne by the involved parties. Many economic activities and transactions, however, exact a significant price on humans and ecosystems, although economists label such price with the reassuring euphemism 'externalities'. In brief, neo-liberalism regards environmental harm as an accidental, unintentional, externality.

Applying the *meum-tuum* distinction suggested by Hayek (1973), we can formulate the following question: Is the environment a public good? The answer is 'Yes', if we, in abstract terms, assimilate it to other non-rival, non-excludable goods, in the sense that one person's enjoyment of the environment does not exclude its enjoyment by others, and in the sense that the good environment is provided to one and all at the same time. However, the answer is 'No' if we believe that goods and resources belong to those who turn them into wealth. Neoliberalism embraces the latter assumption, thus reiterating early liberalist notions according to which the earth has to be turned into property through manipulation, improvement and work. By leaving fruits to rot and venison to putrefy, and for that matter by leaving the earth untouched, we offend the common law of nature (Ruggiero, 2013). With neoliberalism, the entire world is given to those who are more capable of exploiting it, and the environment, therefore, is both *meum* and *tuum*, provided we both know how to extract value out of it. The boundaries, in this case, are not determined by the identification of objects upon which the different individuals exercise control, but merely by their capacity and ingenuity, which constitute the only limit to initiative and development. The ultimate resource, in brief, is the human mind, and throughout history human genius always wins out against natural resource restraints.

The harm caused by economic initiative, therefore, amounts to 'externality'. This includes climate change, disposal of toxic waste, deforestation, pollution of sea, air and land, gigantic disparities in income, transference of toxicity to poor regions and countries, impoverishment of vulnerable populations and destruction of communities (White, 2010; South and Brisman, 2013). These

‘ecocidal’ tendencies (South, 2010) implicit in unfettered development are masked in a process whereby the specific victims of development itself disappear. Ideological strategies preside over this disappearance, among which a hierarchical positioning of populations and individuals is of crucial importance. Ontological priorities are established so that some lives are deemed less valuable than others: in fact, some lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense. There are lives worth living and lives worth destroying, the former being valuable and grievable, the latter devalued and ungrievable (Butler, 2009). Utilitarian reasoning does not object to such distinction, as the suffering of some does not diminish the total happiness generated by the economy. This distinction, in other words, implies the neglect of individual wellbeing and happiness, while the ranking of social goodness and the selection of what is to be chosen are done simply on the basis of the sum total of individual welfares (Sen, 2009).

‘The utilitarian calculus based on happiness or desire-fulfillment can be deeply unfair to those who are persistently deprived since our mental make-up and desires tend to adjust to circumstances, particularly to make life bearable in adverse situations. It is through “coming to terms” with one’s hopeless predicament that life is made somewhat bearable by the traditional underdogs, such as oppressed minorities in intolerant communities, sweated workers in exploitative industrial arrangements, precarious share-croppers living in a world of uncertainty, or subdued housewives in deeply sexist cultures’ (ibid: 282).

This ‘coming to terms’ includes the acceptance of differentiated distribution of vulnerability and precariousness that neoliberal economy promotes.

Habit and domination

Social scientists who intend to critique the economic logic do not have to go far, in that a return to classical texts may provide enough food for thought. Max Weber argues that markets are antithetic to all other communities, because the latter, not the former, presuppose ‘brotherhood’ among people. But let us expand on Weber’s thought.

In trade, the guarantee of legality on the part of two individuals involved is based on the presupposition, often shared by both, that

each of them will have an interest in continuing the exchange in the future, and that therefore will respect the pacts and the promise given. But because trade is a form of socialization with strangers, therefore with enemies, at the origin, the supervision of legality was entrusted to the religious authority, under the tutelage of the temple, which with time became the state. Supervising over legality, however, does not guarantee the rationality of economic initiative, which by pursuing maximum profitability is constantly urged to cross the boundaries of legality itself. There is, therefore, an element of substantive irrationality in the economic order, determined by attempts to make short-term speculative profit, described by Weber as 'pure gambling interest', which 'is one of the sources of the phenomena known as the "crises" of the modern market economy' (Weber, 1978: 40).

Weber adds that humans are creatures of habit, but they are also strongly motivated by their material and ideal interests to circumvent conventional and legal rules, and 'in all societies the economically powerful tend to have a strong influence on the enactment and interpretation of the law' (Roth, 1978: lxix). For this reason, Weber's work on economic issues is in a sense a sociology of domination, in which the gradual usurpation of collective power results in legitimate institutional force.

Following a Weberian classification, power implies the use or threat of coercive force on those who are given orders, whereas domination is to be understood as legitimized, internalized propensity to obey orders (Ruggiero, 2015). This also applies to the economic sphere.

Legitimacy, however, though internalized, needs constant justification on the part of those who have authority, wealth and honour to give reason for their good fortune. Economic thought offers such constant justification.

Ultimately, what prevails in Weber's examination of economic activity is a sense that such activity follows a goal-oriented rationality which is mainly 'traditional' in its orientation. 'Even in cases where there is a high degree of rationalization of action, the element of traditional orientation remains considerable' (Weber 1978: 69). It is against this tradition that the next section of this chapter will now turn.

Poverty as the trigger of development

Practitioners of economics are not allowed friendliness, they are required to describe human motivations as pure and simple, and

keep their economic models devoid of such things as goodwill and moral sentiments. It is extraordinary that economic thought has evolved in this way, describing human goals in such spectacularly narrow terms, also because 'economics is largely an offshoot of ethics' (Sen, 1987: 1-2). Individuals may well understand and wish to maximize their interest, but practical morality should perhaps lead them to the recognition that theirs and other people's interest are interdependent. 'The recognition of interdependence may suggest following certain rules of behaviour, which are not necessarily of intrinsic value, but which are of great instrumental importance in the enhancement of the respective goals of the members of a group' (ibid: 85). Many economic schools of thought fail to recognize this interdependence, although they attempt to persuade us (along with Adam Smith) that the interests of the butchers are linked with those of their costumers. We have to infer that the values of economics are found in economics itself and accept, for example, a notion of justice as inequality, because inequality supposedly encourages the disadvantaged to follow in the footsteps of their role models, namely the privileged. The reality is that the example set by the privileged does not indicate how to create wealth, but how to take it from others. If not acquisitive crime, this gives rise to instability, and the latter to social harm, and the irony is 'that while inequality gives rise to instability, the instability itself gives rise to more inequality' (Stiglitz, 2012: 91).

It is inequality itself, its explanation and rationalization, which have mobilized the most ingenious talents in the economics profession.

'In nearly all economic history most people have been poor and a comparative few have been very rich. Accordingly, there has been a compelling need to explain why this is so – and, alas, on frequent occasion, to tell why it should be so' (Galbraith, 1987: 2-3).

Poverty as the result of divine displeasure was turned by economists into inequality as the trigger of development and happiness, and while political economy merged with theology, existing social relations were sanctified. As Thomas More (1997: 127) argued centuries ago, one can perceive a 'conspiracy' on the part of the wealthy, who through devices and 'all means and crafts', try to 'keep safely without fear of losing what they have unjustly gathered together'. These devices are then turned into laws, whereby the only

legitimate thing the non-wealthy can do is endeavour to imitating the wealthy.

That such an endeavour is implausible is proven by another core notion we find in economic thought, where freedom and equality are deemed irreconcilable. Economics posits that distribution of resources is spontaneous, neutral, market-driven. Following the examples of the privileged, therefore, will only generate acquiescence for a system allowing the privileges openly displayed to remain accessible to a few. If left alone, markets will produce, so we are told, the most efficient and just outcome. This self-serving notion, in fact, justifies a mere upward redistribution of income, and making rich people richer does not make everyone else richer. In brief, wealth trickles up. Moreover, the very 'trickle-down' metaphor does not refer to a gushing waterfall or a potent flow, but to a mere leaking tap.

Economic thought is, indeed, framed in metaphorical terms, nevertheless it constrains our lives, and by virtue of what it hides, can lead to the acceptance of human and environmental degradation. I call this degradation and the social harms thus produced 'the crimes of the economy', which affect workers, consumers, creditors, investors and taxpayers, and of course the environment. Such victims undergo a process of disappearance set off by specific ideological strategies. There are numerous ways of rationalizing the crimes of the economy, the first being the mobilization of the variable externalities, as already remarked. These crimes are often downplayed to the rank of unwanted effect of industrial production or commercial transaction. This is to say, whoever suffers the consequences of an economic operation in which he/she does not take part is the victim of unintentional actions: he or she is an 'externality'.

Enough is enough

Economic history is not a noble history: habit and tradition, as indicated by Weber, urge human action into limitless development and growth, irrespective of consequences. Some economic conducts seem hardly susceptible to the control and discipline of legal norms. If we adhere to Weber's point of view in a more comprehensive way, we have to conclude that development itself, and the growing complexity of markets, make legal coercion increasingly difficult to apply to the economic sphere. As a logical consequence, we may advocate a halt to economic development as the only way of reducing

and preventing the crimes of the economy. Arguments against insatiability might be put forward as a challenge against the current obsession with growth: 'enough is enough'. 'To say that my aim in life is to make more and more money is like saying that my aim in eating is to get fatter and fatter' (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012: 5).

The prosperity of a country cannot be narrowly measured through the amount of money available for a given number of individuals, but also and primarily depends on how resources are distributed, how people live, their degree of participation in the civic and political arena, their capacity to function, make choices and control their outcomes.

Against insatiability, the notion of 'de-growth' can be mobilized, as infinite growth is not only a metaphor for unpleasant and unhealthy obesity, but also because it is criminogenic: it depicts greed and acquisitiveness in a positive light, making them core values of individual and collective behaviour (Latouche, 2008; 2010). Simultaneously, growth as we have experienced it over the decades exacerbates the polarization of wealth, therefore increasing relative deprivation, one of the central variables in the analysis of crime. Ultimately, as a manifestation of insatiability, growth is a form of pathology, like the uncontrollable, neurotic desire to collect things or to swallow enormous quantities of food. Economists cannot keep preaching that such manifestations of neurosis signal healthy collective conditions.

Challenging growth implies a distinction between needs and wants, the former being characterized by an absolute and the latter by a relative nature. We feel the importance of the former whatever the condition of our fellow human beings may be, while we pursue the latter in order to feel superior to our fellows (Keynes, 1972). Wants are infinite and are lured towards both 'bandwagon goods', which are desired because others possess them, and 'snob goods', which are desired because others do not possess them (Veblen, 1924). The latter are mere advertisements of wealth, status consumptions which legitimize permanent growth and constant deviations from the rules officially governing it. Growth satisfies both types of wants while creating new ones, it is like a Faustian Man, ambitious, omnivorous, perpetually driven beyond the limits, the infinite, in a vortex that brings 'goods' and 'bads', namely what I term the crimes of the economy.

Desire of nothing

In the second and final part of this chapter I would like to connect these ideas we find in the economic sphere to more general concepts that I group under the definition 'the philosophy of desire'. Here, we shall see how green criminology has to struggle not only against the logic of markets, but also against a powerful set of notions that belong to our own Western philosophical tradition.

The concept of being is often linked to an idea of 'lacking', referred to a deficit, something we will never attain. To be means to feel a possibility, to reach something that is not there yet, that has not yet become, or will never become real. This notion of being contains ideas revolving around the human uncertainty about the future. Lacan (2014) offers a powerful analysis of this uncertainty, when he describes the subject as 'nobody', being fragmented and decomposed. Thus, human subjects are characterized by a 'void', that they attempt to fill with dynamic responses in form of desires, although desires often fail to address precise objects. Humans are not satisfied by the attainment of a thing, an object, a value item and so on. Therefore, desires never nullify or fill a void: once humans identify an object of desire, and even when they gain possession of that object, their desires grow, move on, turning into desire of nothing. In sum, lack and want are inherent in the human condition. The infinite pursuit of nothing, in its turn, makes the identification of reference points necessary: we need stability and only idols can provide it to us (Ruggiero, 2017). Economic growth is one such idol.

On the other hand, humans are aware that they are finite and mortal: we are lucid about this, and as a consequence, we have a special relationship with temporality. This is why we tend to measure, calculate, as a way of assessing what we have done in the past and what we plan to do in the future. Calculate, plan, build, construct, produce, but also optimize: all of these are carried out with the urgency dictated by our awareness of time and mortality.

To reiterate, one of the possibilities for humans is to identify idols, phantom entities as point of reference, as carriers of stability in a condition otherwise characterized by constant anxiety. But how can this be done, if desire is infinite? Instead of trying to possess things, humans may choose to be possessed by them: they become, in this way, prisoners of the things they want, so that anxiety and uncertainty may cease. We then become totally alienated: we dissolve ourselves in the objects we desire, we become objects and things ourselves. Humans, ultimately, can choose to assert themselves as slaves rather than as subjects.

The idolatry of infinite development causes destruction while encouraging consumption, which has nothing to do with need or even less with desire. Markets, in fact, possess a specific capacity, that of attributing human anxiety to the lack of something they can provide. You are anxious because you need this, and here it is, I can give it to you. This is the answer to your restlessness. Commodities, in this sense have a metaphysical subtlety and a theological character, they are independent entities, acquiring their own life. Of course, we find these suggestions in Marx, although in classical literature we may find even more powerful renditions of them.

When Balzac's *Père Goriot* is dying, his daughter attends a sumptuous ball, which she prioritizes over tending her father in his death bed. The ball is a display of wealth, luxury and status, and the things in view seem to take on their own independent life (Balzac, 1966). The lamps light out the Hotel de Beauseant, a gendarme in all the glory of his uniform stands on either side of the resplendent gateway, while the great world flocks in. The attire of the most beautiful women in Paris is dazzling, while the most distinguished men proudly deploy their decorations, stars and ribbons, as if showing less their military honour than their bank account. The music of the orchestra vibrates and the waves of notes confer more splendor to the golden ceiling of the palace. It is a society adorning itself with things that speak, move and dance by themselves. In that ball we can see not only a ghostly dance that repels the 'spectre haunting Europe', but also an assemblage of commodities endowed with invincible force and frightening power. Lamps and golden ceilings are not just things, and their properties do not merely respond to human needs. They are on a stage as commodities, symbolic entities acting and interacting among one another, presenting themselves as marked by their specific market value (Ruggiero, 2015). The ball is a *coup de theatre*, in which the ordinary is transfigured and metamorphosed into a supernatural thing. Commodities assume ghostly silhouettes, invade the stage with their spectral moves, come alive and address other commodities, their ghostly fellows (Derrida, 2006). In brief, Balzac's characters prefigure the insatiability of consumerism (Eagleton, 2009).

Conclusion

Neoliberalism posits this type of insatiability. It attempts to transform subjects as we know them in specific social contexts into universal beings, unchanged by circumstances and unchangeable by

political events. These universal beings are required to produce not something they need to use, but something they need to destroy, as enjoyment of a commodity is less important than its death. As Baudrillard (2005) put it, production survives and continues only because of this massacre: things have to become obsolete, their use-value has to diminish, otherwise the process as a whole comes to a halt. Green criminology cannot avoid addressing these destructive effects of production and economic growth.

Destruction is fed by a mimetic mechanism, as we have seen: we want what other people have, but then we also want what other people do not have. And this mimetic behaviour is justified by neoliberalism, which also preaches increasing social inequality, as the deprived can look to the advantaged and find their role model in them. The advantaged, in this way, become ideals or indeed idols to which all are expected to conform their conduct and activity.

This mechanism was clear in the mind of Saint Thomas, who argued that we are sad when faced with the wellbeing of others because we regard it as the cause of our own humiliation. Sadness, impotence and failure: these are all associated with dissatisfaction, and as a consequence they are experienced as reasons for compensation if not revenge. Inequality and consumerism foster envy. The subject does not consume, he/she is consumed.

To conclude, green criminology may find inspiration and novel impetus from the radical critique of economic thought and a dissection of the philosophy of desire. These are epitomized by the motto 'the car is war', with which Walter Benjamin (2011: 167) meant that our societies develop technical means without being able to control them morally. The destructive impetus of neoliberal doctrines reveals the ruinous 'discrepancy between the enormous efforts of technology and its miserable moral illumination' (ibid). This moral void echoes the legendary figure of Mephistopheles, who pursues evil while producing good, who follows his vices claiming that they will turn into public virtues, who is guided by egoistic desires but claims to cause collective benefit. In his radical critique of 'development', Benjamin (ibid: 309) looks at a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*, in which an angel walks away from something she stares at. Her eyes are wide open, her mouth is gaping, her wings are spread out. The angel of history must possess similar traits: where we see a chain of events she sees total catastrophe, an accumulation of debris upon debris. The angel would like to fly into the past, attempt to awaken the dead and mend the damage caused. But from heaven a storm blows that pushes her towards the future, while the

heap of ruins grows in front of her. 'What we call progress is this storm'.

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